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ABSTRACT

Because CETA and vocational education programs have the potential of serving the important social goals of reducing unemployment and providing the benefit of training, evaluation control at the top is essential. This control can be exerted in a manner that avoids some of the pitfalls of overcontrol through providing more alternatives and facilitating decentralized choice and sampling within this range of options. Providing more options at the national level to facilitate local choice may seem like too much work. However, a steep price for evaluations of these programs is already being paid. So, the question of what it takes to make evaluation results truely useful and used is very important. It is shortsighted to assume that evaluation data can influence national policy without being perceived as relevant, accurate, and useful at the local level. Since human resource development programs are locally implemented, federal initiations can be fairly easily blocked or side stepped at the local level. Consequently, the issue of creating an acceptable balance between federal and local control of evaluations is critical to the long range survival, improvement, and success of human resource development programs in meeting significant national problems. (Author/RL)

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Federal vs. Local Control in the Evaluation of Human Resource Development Programs*

by

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Background

"Local studies are better," says Eugene Reville, superintendent of the Buffalo, New York schools. "What's true in Chicago certainly doesn't always apply to Buffalo." But James Coleman, director of High School & Beyond, which is the largest federal study ever on the effects of high school education says the government hopes to accumulate enough data to be useful to federal, state, and local educational officials, administrators, and legislators in shaping high school programs. (Columbus Dispatch, March 30, 1980)

Of the many interesting issues which shape the evaluations of large human service programs, one of the most penetrating is the tension between federal and local control of evaluation. This symposium will focus on the issue--"What is an appropriate balance between federal and local control for producing the most valid and useful evaluations?" We'll examine the issue from the the perspective of two human resource development programs--vocational education and CETA.

A strong case can be put forth on both sides of this issue. But first a few grounding points. Both programs have federal policy intentions propelling them. For CETA it is reduction of unemployment. For vocational education it is provision of the benefit of training. Since both programs are driven by policy intents, there is a national interest in their evaluation to see it they're making a difference on these problems. On the other

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hand, both programs are locally implemented. Only 10% of vocational education funding comes from federal sources. Although 100% of CETA funding is from federal sources, funds are primarily controlled by local CETA prime sponsors. When the federal government provides support for human service programs at the local level, both the Federal government and the local agency have a vested interest in the results.

So a delimma emerges. At this point in history, the balance of power in both CETA and vocational education is toward federal control of evaluation since there are federal legislative requirements. Datta, in her article, "Better Luck This Time" (1979), provides an excellent history of evaluations of vocational education which portrays the pendulum swinging toward more federal control of evaluation since th passage of the vocational education amendments in 1976. On the other hand, since there are proportionately fewer federal dollars in vocational education, this has a weakening effect on federal control. In both fields, considerable local resistance to complying with evaluation mandates is evident. So in actuality, the quality of evaluation data is controlled at the local level because implementation is locally controlled.

The Case For and Against Local Control

Some of the difficulties and benefits in placing control of evaluation on the local side are outlined below:

The Case For Local Control

Ownership. Local control facilitates a sense of ownership in the evaluation results. More attention tends to be paid to the accuracy and completeness of the data.

Locally Useful. The most appropriate variables to evaluate may differ from situation to situation. Local choice of what's measured facilitates use of data for local decisions and improvements.

Sensitive to local variations. It is often impractical and costly to use standardized definitions and techniques where neither fits the local situation. Some flexibility in using the most appropriate definitions and techniques would facilitate more accurate, more useful, and less fabricated data.

The Case Against Local Control

Self-serving. Locally controlled evaluations tend to be self-serving. Positive findings are inflated. Negative findings are downplayed or ignored. Federally controlled evaluations which are conducted by non-partisan agencies such as the National Institute of Education Study of Vocational Education (1977) tend to be less self-serving.

Data Gaps. Locally controlled evaluations focus randomly on measuring different outcomes. Failure to evaluate some of the most important macro policy outcomes may occur.

Difficult to aggregate. Locally controlled evaluations lack standard definitions and techniques for measuring outcomes. Variables like "job placement rate" and "vocational student" may have as many different definitions and measurement techniques as there are programs.

The Case For and Against Federal Control

Some of the difficulties and benefits in placing control of evaluation on the federal side are outlined below:

The Case For Federal Control

Leadership. Federal control provides the impetus for making evaluation happen and the leadership for assuring that standards for completeness and quality exist.

Nationwide Coordination. Federal control provides essential coordination in delimiting and clarifying what should be measured and how it should be measured. Without this coordination, there is too much variation and too many options.

Standardization. Federal control facilitates standardization and consistency of the data collected so that it can be aggregated for national policy decisions.

Mandated accountability. Federal control based on legislative mandates makes it difficult to ignore or sidestep the responsibility to be accountable.

The Case Against Federal Control

Leads to local compliance. Federally controlled evaluations tend to lead to passive compliance at the local level. Since there is little sense of ownership, data may not be handled with much care.

Not used locally. Federally controlled evaluation which focus on national policy tend to produce information which is not useful to local programs.

Inaccurate and fabricated data. Federally controlled evaluations are insensitive to the variations in local programs. The same definitions and measuring techniques cannot be used in all situations. This lack of fit may lead to inaccurate data at best and fabricated data at worst.

Misplaced accountability. Federal control tends to place accountability on programs and organizational processes rather than on participants progress and outcomes.

The Context of Federally Driven Evaluations

So are there viable answers? Is there an appropriate balance of power between federal and local sources? Before turning to answers, it is useful to examine the context of federally driven evaluations and some of the perceptions which influence current thinking.

First, there is a perception that data for federal policy issues must represent every program in the nation on every important variable. My sense is that nationally useful data need not be nationally collected. Data from a sample of programs or data on a sample of variables could be nationally useful and less cumbersome to collect. For example the National Longitudinal Study (Research Triangle Institute, 1978) produces data from a sample that is useful for evaluating CETA.

Second, there is a perception that national standardization of definitions and evaluation techniques is required for nationally useful data. My sense is that standardization can be overly limiting and counter-productive. In vocational education, The Vocational Education Data System, the National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics all seem to be making significant progress in standardization. But there are costs. Standardization can squeeze a program into boxes it does not fit, aggregate data in a way or at a level that is useless for local decisions, mask true program outcomes, and provide justification for outcomes that may be lucky artifacts rather than educationally significant effects.

Third, federally driven evaluations emphasize outcome or impact data which seems appealing but may not have long-term utility for understanding and improving human service programs. Questions such as "What really happened in a human resource development program?" "What did participants actually gain?" "Why did the program work or fail?" or "What features of the program were most and least effective?" typically go unanswered in federally driven evaluations.

Recommendations for Balancing Federal and Local Control

I generally support more local control in the evaluation process. But this does depend on who's paying for the services. In the case of vocational education, the local level has less than a 10% reason to support federally driven evaluations. In the case of CETA, there is a 100% reason so it should be easier to establish federal control. However, for both vocational education and CETA, I feel that increased local control of selected aspects will improve the accuracy and usefulness of the data collected. Some specific recommendations for facilitating a viable balance of power between federal and local roles are offered below:

1. Facilitate some local choice of what's measured to maximize local ownership and utility. For example, categories of variables that must be evaluated could be established at the federal level. Selection of specific variables to evaluate within each category based on individual local plans could be

made locally. The National Center for Research in Vocational Education has done extensive research in establishing categories of outcomes for vocational education (Darcy 1979).

2. Facilitate some local choice of definitions of key variables. Alternative "standard" definitions of key variables, such as job placement rate, vocational student, or program participant, could be developed at the federal level so the definitions which best fits a local situation can be used. This would allow selection of the definition which most closely fits prevailing local practices for collecting data so that costly redevelopment is not needed. National data could be aggregated for each definition.

3. Facilitate some local choice of evaluation items. Sets of evaluation items could be developed at the federal level. Items could then be selected from at the local level with provisions for adding original items exclusively for local use. (This technique is widely used for course evaluation at colleges and universities.)

4. Increase the use of case studies and sampling. In-depth, well executed case studies of selected programs may provide richer information for policy decisions than superficial surveys of large populations of programs. (See Spirer 1980 for a guidelines for conducting case studies in vocational education.) Nationally representative statistical data on program enrollments, completions, placements, etc. is needed. Collection of this data would benefit from sampling of programs, participants, and of the variables which are evaluated using techniques such as longi-

tudinal studies (See Franchak, Franken, and Subisak 1980 for guidelines for conducting longitudinal studies) and multiple matrix sampling. (See Hively 1974.)

Summary

In summary, the current problem of local vs. federal control of evaluation is a variation of one of the most ancient and enduring organizational problems--top down vs. decentralized management. Because CETA and vocational education programs have the potential of serving the very important social goals of reducing unemployment and providing the benefit of training, I think evaluation control at the top is essential. I also think that this control can be exerted in a manner that avoids some of the pitfalls of overcontrol through providing more alternatives and facilitating decentralized choice and sampling within this range of options.

Providing more options at the national level to facilitate local choice may seem like too much work. However, we are already paying a steep price for evaluations of these programs. So the question of what it takes to make evaluation results truely useful and used is very important. It is shortsighted to assume that evaluation data can influence national policy without being perceived as relevant, accurate, and useful at the local level. Since human resource development programs are locally implemented, federal initiations can be fairly easily bloched or side stepped at the local level. Consequently, the issue of creating an acceptable balance between federal and local control of evaluations is critical to the long range survival, improvement, and success of human resource development programs in meeting significant national problems.

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